
Magic, myth and misunderstanding: cultural responses to owls in Africa and their implications for conservation

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Avec leurs cris nocturnes mystérieux, leurs faciès presque humains et leur vision binoculaire perçante, les hibous ont suscité de vives réactions parmi les sociétés africaines. Dans le continent entier, des croyances et mythologies complexes ont donné aux hibous une réputation ambiguë ou entièrement négative. Les auteurs recensent les éléments historiques à l'origine de ces attitudes et fournissent quelques rares données récentes sur les perceptions africaines des hibous. Les deux sources indiquent que les oiseaux sont perçus comme portant malheur. Les auteurs avancent que ces attitudes culturelles profondément ancrées sont largement ignorées par les environnementalistes. Ces perceptions négatives rendent pourtant la protection des hibous particulièrement difficile, une situation d'autant plus préoccupante dans un continent qui contient $\approx 37\%$ des espèces de hibous en danger du monde.

Introduction

Ever a pioneer in the field of African ornithology, the late Leslie Brown wrote in his book, *African Birds of Prey*:

I cannot find that there are very detailed accounts of the role of owls in native legend, fable and witchcraft. To acquire this sort of knowledge from the African peoples requires such investigatory zeal and linguistic ability that one has little time for anything else Some anthropologist should write this up for the convenience of such as myself¹.

While neither of the authors of this paper is an anthropologist we share Brown's 30-year-old wish for more information on a subject that has long been neglected and one which we consider of some significance to an understanding of owl status and conservation in Africa.

Owls and witchcraft in Africa

With their unearthly nocturnal calls, their human-like faces and piercing binocular vision, members of the family Strigidae have provoked a deep and almost universal response in human beings. However there are few regions of the world where owls have had quite the impact that they have on African societies. Throughout the entire continent there is a complex, varied, sometimes contradictory, but more often corresponding, body of beliefs and mythology centred on these birds.

Many of the ideas revolve around two key beliefs. Owls are perceived as harbingers of evil and usually they are viewed as messengers that announce forthcoming illness or even death to the observer, or the

observer's family. The other central belief is that owls are integrally involved in sorcery. Should an owl appear to a person steeped in traditional lore, then the individual often makes one of two assumptions: either the owl is seen as the nocturnal form assumed temporarily by a witch in the course of his or her nefarious practices, or that the owl, while retaining its own natural form, has somehow been coerced into service and is itself abroad on witch's business. (We need to introduce a caveat at this point. Practitioners of traditional medicine across Africa vary widely in name, role and methods. These range from providers of simple herbal and mineral-based remedies, to diviners, oracles and agents of the black arts. We have tried to draw a distinction between traditional healers, who are benign in intention, and those sorcerers who work with spells and medicines that have harmful, even life-threatening goals. We have reserved the words witch and witchcraft for these individuals and their practices. However it is likely that some traditional healers operate, as it were, on both sides of the moral fence.)

Although these various notions appear bizarre and can easily be scorned as nonsense by anyone who has enjoyed a science-based education, we argue that they should not be dismissed lightly. In fact it is precisely the kind of brisk rejection that the beliefs suffer in educated circles that is part of the issue this article seeks to address. What is of significance is the fact that these ideas *are* widespread, still have great potency and are deeply rooted in parts of African society. They have a major impact on shaping African attitudes towards such birds as owls—prevailing attitudes that run counter to the environmentally sensitive spirit that is the very basis of conservation effort.

The African region, as defined by the African Bird Club, is home to 47 of the world's 204 owls, or c23%, but it holds almost 37% (nine of 26) of the most vulnerable owl species. By itself this fact should render traditional African attitudes towards owls of significance to a wider ornithological audience. However, the other crucial issue is that owls are widely killed and collected in Africa, especially in parts of West Africa, to supply magico-medicinal practices often connected with witchcraft and traditional healing. There are few quantitative data on this harvest but it probably involves thousands, possibly tens of thousands, of owls annually.

Earlier studies of owl-witch beliefs

Just as there is little systematic information on owl harvests, except for several papers by one of us (HM), there is little more than anecdotal information on the prevalence of owl-witch beliefs. Yet several important works on African belief systems and on African perception of animals confirm a general picture.

In *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Evans-Pritchard¹ wrote that many nocturnal animals are associated with witchcraft. But the owl is considered especially unlucky if they hoot around a homestead. When a man hears the cry of the owl known as *gbuku* then he knows a witch is abroad and he blows his magic whistle and seats himself by the medicines that grow at the centre of his homestead.

The notion that the evil omen of an owl hoot could be counteracted by possession of a particular whistle (made in this case from the windpipe of a particular bird) is repeated in Nassan's *Fetichism in West Africa*¹⁰. Nassan also wrote that practitioners of magic gather together at a forest location using the call of an owl as their signal. Ordinary villagers, by contrast, live in fear of the owl's cry, which they take to be Kulu (the spirit of the departed) and interpret as a warning that someone is soon to die.

In *Bird-Lore of the Eastern Cape Province* the Reverend Godfrey³ wrote that eagle owls *Bubo* sp are killed and used for sorcery purposes, and that owls in general are 'believed to be in league with the killing witch-doctors'. He also recorded that should an owl settle on a hut, people believed this to foretell the death of the occupants. The standard response was to chase the bird away by throwing a burning brand at it. Should an owl be caught it was doused in paraffin, then simultaneously ignited and set free, the bird briefly flying off in a lethal blaze of fire. The people justified this crude persecution on the basis that the bird had been sent by ill-disposed witch doctors.

In *Giguyu Natural History* Muigai & Bennun wrote that members of the Kenyan tribe viewed the

presence of a hooting owl on or close to a hut as a sign of impending death for its owners. In order to prevent it perching there again the roof was scattered with broken pieces of calabash or smeared with blood or red ochre. Similarly owls were believed to weep white milk-like tears, indicating a general association with the supernatural or death⁹.

Studies of attitudes towards owls in Malawi and East/southern Africa

The only recent quantitative assessment of African attitudes towards owls was made by HM in Malawi in 1996–97. Although the results were published in two papers, 'General public owl knowledge in Malawi' in *The Society of Malawi Journal*, and 'Comparative study on general public owl knowledge in Malawi and in eastern and southern Africa', in *Nyala*⁸, the limited availability of these publications make it worth repeating some of the principal findings.

In Malawi 151 persons were interviewed in 1996, and in East/southern Africa 38 persons during 1997. The second survey covered the following countries: Angola (one respondent), Botswana (one), Kenya (six), Mozambique (five), Namibia (two), South Africa (seven), Tanzania (two), Uganda (one), Zambia (10) and Zimbabwe (three).

In Malawi 37% of the interviewed people were female, 11–72 years of age, and 63% were male (10–82 years). For the East/southern African material the respective percentages were 42 and 58, while the age range of females was 21–59 and that for males 27–56 years.

Around 46% of the Malawian and 47% of the East/southern African respondents treated all owl species as a single undifferentiated entity. In both surveys males knew more species than females, but only 11% in Malawi and 21% in East/southern Africa recognised more than three different owl species of 12 possible species in Malawi and c20 in East/southern Africa. However, in both surveys, a majority of respondents knew that owls mainly eat small mammals, although snakes were also prominently mentioned in the material (69% in Malawi and 37% elsewhere).

Both in Malawi and elsewhere in East/southern Africa people correctly listed forests as the most important habitat for owls. In Malawi 17% listed cemeteries as an owl habitat, since heavy deforestation has meant that in the majority of Malawian villages cemeteries are the only wooded areas left.

In Malawi 98%, and elsewhere 92%, had heard owls calling at least a few times, often during the hours of darkness and close to houses. Cemeteries were again especially mentioned by 9% of Malawian respondents as locations from which owls call, al-

though this association was not noted in East/southern Africa. It is interesting to observe that this connection between owls and cemeteries echoes a situation in India, where the forest eagle owl, an element of many Hindu legends, is said to call from cemeteries, which are the only well forested areas in many places⁶.

Almost all the interviewed persons knew of traditional beliefs, stories or myths concerning owls. The most commonly cited were along the lines of: 'Should an owl settle on a roof of a house, it is regarded as a messenger of death'; 'When people hear owls singing they believe that somebody will pass away during that night'; 'They are not real birds, but are created by witches or wizards for bewitching people'; 'If an owl crosses the road while you are travelling you are sure to encounter misfortune'.

As a conclusion the respondents were asked to classify owls according to their knowledge and beliefs. In Malawi, almost all considered owls as a bad omen. The division on gender lines was 89% of females and 81% of males. In East/southern Africa a significant majority associated owls with bad omens, with 75% of females and 59% of males. Both sets of data strongly indicate that these ideas are more widely found among women than men. Yet it is important to observe that 39% in Malawi and 32% in East/southern Africa found owls beneficial. Once again those who viewed owls in a positive light were more often men rather than women.

In Malawi, on average every fourth and in East/southern Africa every fifth person interviewed knew somebody who had killed or sacrificed an owl or owls. The reasons for 51 killings are listed in percentage terms below^{6,7}:

Superstitious beliefs to avoid bad omen	27.5
To make (magic) medicine	7.7
Because the owl makes too much noise	11.7
Just for fun during hunting	19.6
To be eaten as a relish	15.7
Because the owl was nesting too near the house	5.8
Because the owl was associated with witchcraft	2.0
Because the owl killed a hen	2.0
Because the owl attacked first	2.0
Because the owl entered a hospital	2.0
The owl was killed by a car	2.0
Did not know why he/she killed the owl	2.0

Owls in the magico-medicinal trade in West Africa

In West Africa a wide range of birds is sold on skin-and-bone stalls as part of a general system of traditional

medicine. These 'fetish markets' are particularly conspicuous in four countries—Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria—and collectively they create a strong demand among the region's hunters and trappers.

However, the final purpose for their market products is to be incorporated as active ingredients in the potions and ointments devised by traditional medicine men. These important members of many African communities are part herbalist, part sorcerer, part psychiatrist and part priest. Because both spiritual and physical ill health in Africa are fundamentally associated with the presumed or actual aggressive action of other sorcerers, and because owls are so closely identified with witchcraft itself, these birds feature in many 'medicinal' preparations. For these reasons owls are disproportionately represented as items of trade on skin-and-bone stalls.

In those markets examined by MC in Bénin such as Cotonou's Dantokpa, one of the largest commercial centres in all West Africa, owls sometimes comprised 50% of all stall items exhibited for sale. Even in countries such as Cameroon, where there is no developed market for dead birds or their parts, the few skins that are being traded by the ubiquitous herbalists, are almost all owls⁸.

Specific uses of owls by traditional healers and sorcerers

Although West Africa is the region where the trade in owls is most highly developed, the use of owls and their parts as medicinal ingredients by traditional healers and witch-doctors is almost certainly a continent-wide phenomenon. Both authors have interviewed traditional healers as well as dealers in owl skins. Some of their specific practices and beliefs are reproduced to indicate the significance and role of owls in their work.

In Cameroon the heart was identified as especially prized for its magico-medicinal power, although two traditional healers in that country confirmed that all parts of the bird were effective medicine.

One explained that patients came to them because of a curse by another sorcerer whose intention was to make them ill. The aggressor takes owl parts and prepares a spell. In order to counter-act this type of practice and working on the same principle as an inoculation, the traditional healer also takes owl parts, or a whole bird, and cooks it. The charred powder is then added to other herbal ingredients and given to the patient to eat. Any witchcraft in his body will be driven out.

Another healer reported that owl parts were used, in conjunction with other herbal ingredients, to construct a form of talisman worn on the person in an

amulet or similar container. This served both as a protection against witchcraft but could also be effective against general bad luck. Should an owl fly into the house of an individual wearing such a charm then the bird would instantly fall dead on contact with the 'medicine' contained therein.

Five contemporary medicine men were interviewed in Malawi in 1997 and all had slightly different ways of using owls, but admitted that owl-based medicines are mainly used for bewitching and killing people, rather than for healing diseases.

Most often the owl head or heart is pounded up and placed in the garden with a seedling or seed of a fruit tree planted among the ground bird tissue. When this fruit tree grows, its roots will be used for bewitching. The roots are mixed with other roots and herbs, which are often very poisonous. The medicine man sings (in Nyanja-language) to the mixed root and herb cocktail 'kazizi-kula, kazizi-kula-kula' ('grow owl, grow-grow') and the owl will be born again. Finally the owl becomes a cat or bat-like creature, which flies to the person or the home of the individual to whom it has been sent. Then the owl hoots and, after a few days, the person or the family member starts to suffer from an unknown illness. Days or weeks later the person dies. It is a touch perverse that some medicine men suggest owls should not be used for killing, since the victim suffers greatly during the four weeks or more of illness. By using a lion, leopard, snake or crocodile instead, the spell would cause instant death!

In contrast to practices found in Malawi, owls are also used for healing purposes in South Africa, where an estimated 70% of the black population make use of the services of one or another form of traditional healer. Derwent & Mander³ describe one such healer, Mrs Zodwa Khumalo from Durban, who suggested that, when alive, owls may harbour bad news and evil spirits. But once dead, they can be used to help people with little energy that sleep during the day. She said, that she tells the people 'You must wake up in the day. You are a person, not an owl. And then they must take some medicine made with the owl'.

Witch-owl beliefs and education

We need to post three more caveats before going on to discuss these final aspects of owls in magico-medicinal practices. Firstly, the whole field of African traditional medicine and, most especially, the use and belief in the effectiveness of witchcraft, are deeply sensitive issues, particularly for those who are educated. Secondly, witch-owl associations are difficult to assess quantitatively, or even to discuss in anything but an anecdotal context, as they relate to people's subjective perceptions and complex belief systems.

Thirdly, as a subject for study we need to recognise that it is a rapidly moving target and liable to modification as a consequence of education, changes in lifestyle, migration from the village to the city, access to external or foreign influences such as television, radio etc.

For these reasons it would be indiscreet to discuss the issue in anything but the most anonymous context. However we would stress that while it is comforting to presume a science-based education would lead to a breakdown of any traditional system of ideas and, in particular, soften attitudes towards birds such as owls, this need not necessarily be the case. In fact the anecdotal evidence acquired by both authors suggests that, however contradictory the two ideologies may appear, witch-owl beliefs can co-exist with a strong and apparently sophisticated grasp of ecology, conservation and the physical sciences in general. We have encountered African workers on projects managed by internationally recognised conservation organisations that openly discussed and recognised the relationship between owls and witchcraft, and even specified the difference in vocalisations between an owl *per se* and an owl that was really a sorcerer in disguise.

Another anecdote of a compelling kind involved a university lecturer educated for many years in Europe. Despite his highly developed understanding of Western philosophy, history and European culture in general, the individual openly confessed that he viewed the owl repeatedly visiting the vicinity of his home on successive evening as, in fact, not a bird, but a female witch from the village who was well known to him. Her intentions towards him were presumed to be evil and the lecturer claimed to know of sorcerers who could help him. One of their counter powers was a capacity to take a single feather from an unwelcome owl and then through magical processes to conjure up the entire owl in their presence.

Owl-witch associations and conservation

The key purpose of this article is to highlight the profound historical association in Africa between owls and evil. While that link is found almost worldwide it is still especially strong in Africa, where almost 40% of the world's most threatened owls are to be found. We believe it has been overlooked by conservationists and deserves closer scrutiny.

While it is not our intention to propose the nature of any remedial measures for these widespread attitudes towards owls, we would argue that any initiative specifically structured to protect threatened owl species should involve an investigation of local beliefs and uses of owls. Moreover a counteracting educa-



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Figure 1. The juxtaposition of this moribund Barn Owl *Tyto alba* with a 5,000 franc note is a graphic reminder of why so many owls are traded in the markets of West Africa: their skins are valuable as a magico-medical commodity (Mark Cocker)

Figure 2. A live White-faced Scops Owl *Otus leucotis* for sale in Abomey market, Bénin (Mark Cocker)

Figure 3. Skins stalls are widely found in commercial markets throughout parts of West Africa and owls, usually Barn *Tyto alba*, White-faced Scops *Otus leucotis* and Pearl-spotted *Glaucidium perlatum*, often form as much as 50 percent of all sale items (Mark Cocker)

Figure 4. Owing to its size Spotted Eagle Owl *Bubo africanus* is one of the most feared species in Africa south of the Sahara (Heimo Mikkola)

Figure 5. Barn Owl *Tyto alba* is inextricably linked with notions of sorcery because of its habit of hunting in close proximity to human habitation (Heimo Mikkola)

Figure 6. A selection of magico-medical plants, roots and seeds from Malawi that are used in conjunction with owl ingredients. Most of these plant parts are highly poisonous (Heimo Mikkola)

tional programme should be an integral part of any conservation work.

As any birdwatcher knows, owls are not just a natural and beneficial element of any healthy ecosystem, they are also charismatic and beautiful animals, whose presence should only enrich our lives. It is a tragedy to burden them with the taint of our own human failings. ?

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